

The Moral Citizen

Charles McNamara
charles.mcnamara@columbia.edu
<https://charlesmcnamara.com>

Course Description

Our decisions about how to act are almost never simple. Should we strive to obey our country's laws, or should we follow a set of guiding religious or philosophical principles? Should we direct our lives toward some broader social or political aim, or should we seek out a pleasant existence for our individual selves? Should we expect others around us to follow the ethical rules we set up for ourselves, or should we expect them to determine their own guidelines, even if they differ from our own? These questions have vexed philosophical and religious thinkers for millennia, and there are no easy answers for any of them. In this course, we will look at a selection of ancient and early modern thinkers who provide compelling yet competing views on these central considerations of what one must do to be a good human and a good citizen.

Taking Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as its first major text, the course examines how Aristotle understands ethics not just as a problem of individual excellence but also as a matter of civic virtue. As two Platonic texts illustrate, however, these notions of ethical behavior can collide in ways that bring about tragic consequences. By looking at Plato's *Apology* and *Crito* (and at Sophocles' *Antigone*), this course considers the whether virtuous individuals should always obey civic laws, even when they appear unjust. Continuing in the traditions of ancient philosophical schools, the course turns to the teachings of Stoics and Epicureans as they consider the degree to which one even needs to partake in the life of a citizen in one's individual search for virtue.

The second half of the course considers how later traditions approach these problems. Beginning with Augustine's *City of God* and looking ahead to the early modern writings of Martin Luther, these Christian authors interrogate the fundamental principles of ancient ethical theories and reconsider the allegiances and aims one has as a citizen of an earthly government. Centuries after Luther, Kant recasts these problems of ethics and citizenship by extending the capacity for ethical understanding to all rational beings. Asserting that morality is grounded in "the commonest human reason," Kant includes all rational agents in a "kingdom of ends" whereby moral behavior might be expected from all, regardless of state, religion, or era.

Required Texts

- Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by D. Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Augustine. *City of God*. Translated by H. Bettenson. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Cicero. *On Moral Ends*. Translated by R. Woolf. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

- Epictetus. *Enchiridion*. Translated by N. White. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983.
- Hillerbrand, H. *The Protestant Reformation*. New York: Perennial, 2009.
- Kant, I. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by M. Gregor and J. Timmermann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Plato. *The Dialogues of Plato, Volume 1*. Translated by R. E. Allen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.
- Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone; Oedipus the King; Oedipus at Colonus*. Translated by R. Fagles. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Course Overview

- Week 1 – Introduction
 - Plato, *Apology*
- Week 2 – Aristotelian Teleology
 - Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: Books 1-3
- Week 3 – Intellectual and Moral Virtue
 - Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: Books 4-7
- Week 4 – The Wise Lawgiver and Citizenship
 - Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: Books 8-10
- Week 5 – Conflicts between Man and Citizen
 - Plato, *Crito*
- Week 6 – Conflicts between Man and Citizen, Cont.
 - Sophocles, *Antigone*
- Week 7 – Pleasure and Epicureanism
 - Cicero, *On Moral Ends*: Books 1-3
- Week 8 – A Stoic Alternative
 - Cicero, *On Moral Ends*: Books 4-5
 - Epictetus, *Enchiridion*
- Week 9 – Political Failure and Individual Virtue
 - Augustine, *City of God*: Books 1, 5, 8
- Week 10 – Human and Divine Ends
 - Augustine, *City of God*: Books 14, 19, 22
- Week 11 – Church, State, and Righteousness
 - Luther, “Concerning Governmental Authority” and “Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to Galatians.”
- Week 12 – Good Wills and Human Duties
 - Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: Section 1
- Week 13 – Imperatives in the Kingdom of Ends
 - Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: Section 2
- Week 14 – A Reconsideration of Virtue
 - Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy” and Conclusion

Course Requirements and Grading

- Participation and Discussion Posts (%10)
 - This course centers around participating in discussions, not listening to lectures. Sitting in silence, even the most attentive silence, will penalize your final grade in the course. Additionally, I will post a selection of study questions about the upcoming material on our course website. Before midnight on the night before class, you are expected to write 3-5 sentences in response to one of these questions.
- Moral Dilemma Quizzes (10%)
 - Occasionally I will begin class by presenting you with a moral dilemma and ask you to respond to this dilemma according to the principles set out in the week's reading. These assignments are in some sense a "reading quiz," but they also give you a chance to put into practice and to make more concrete some of the more abstract principles we encounter in our texts.
- Midterm (%20)
- Midterm Paper (%20) and Final Paper (35%)
 - Writing is arguably the best technology we have for explaining our thoughts to each other. One central aim of this course is to cultivate your ability to write thoughtful, original prose. The writing assignments for this class demand careful argumentation, verbal precision, and clear language. Keep in mind this advice from Julius Caesar: "Just as you should avoid a craggy cliff, so you should avoid an unheard and unaccustomed word."